

25 Best Progressive Victories in 2012

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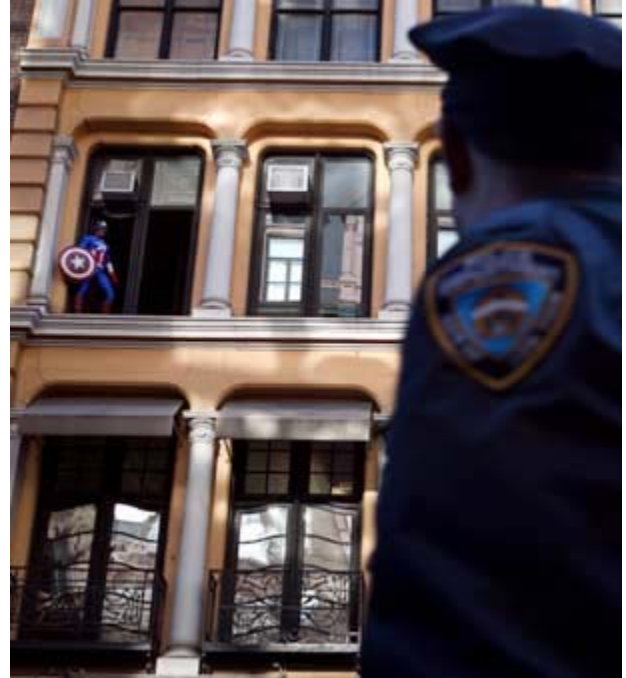
Progressives are rarely satisfied. It is part of our political DNA. There's so much injustice in the world, it's sometimes hard to feel that we're making progress. But as Chinese philosopher Laozi reminded us, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

As I document in my book, [The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame](#), the radical ideas of one generation are often the common sense of the next generation. One hundred years ago, ideas like Social Security, the minimum wage and women's suffrage were considered radical. Fifty years ago, most African-Americans in the South couldn't vote, few women were welcome in politics and many professions, and all but a handful of gays and lesbians were locked in the closet. In other words, if we take a long view, we can see that things do often change for the better, sometimes in big leaps, but usually in incremental stages.

Many progressives equate the word "compromise" with "sell-out," but the strategic question is whether compromises are dead ends or stepping stones to further progress. In their book [Organizing for Social Change](#), Kim Bobo, Steve Max and Jackie Kendall contend that activism is successful if it (1) wins real improvements in people's lives, (2) gives people a sense of their own power and (3) changes the structure of power so that people begin the next phase of movement-building with greater leverage.

So let's look back at 2012 and see if we can recognize 25 victories - elections, ballot measures, court rulings, legislation and new waves of mobilization - that meet those three criteria.

1. 99 to 1. In September 2011, a handful of activists took over Zuccotti Park in New York, and then the movement spread to every city in the country. Although Occupy Wall Street was forced after a few months to disperse physically, its ideas have continued to resonate with the American public, including its slogan casting America's economic divide as the 1% versus the 99%. Throughout 2012, the Occupy movement changed the nation's conversation at dinner tables, workplaces and newsrooms. It helped frame the political debate in both the Republican and Democratic primaries by focusing public and media attention on the widening disparities of income, wealth and power. Even in the GOP primaries, Mitt Romney's opponents attacked him as a job-killing corporate plutocrat. Democrats took advantage of the changing mood to focus attention on corporate power and the billionaires behind the tea party and the new right-wing super-PACs. Politicians and the mainstream media now consistently refer to the richest 1%, often highlighting the class warfare waged by the super-rich. Language matters. This impressive linguistic ju-jitsu has helped reframe our national conversation over taxes, the distribution of wealth and income and campaign finance.



Peter Sands, dressed as Captain America, stands in a window along Broadway as labor groups and others affiliated with Occupy Wall Street march in New York, May 1, 2012. (Photo: Todd Heisler / The New York Times)

2. LGBT Equality. Polls show that a majority of Americans now support same-sex marriage or civil unions, and that those under 40 overwhelmingly support marriage equality. Public opinion has changed dramatically in a short period, suggesting that conservatives will soon no longer be able to use homophobia as a "wedge" issue in elections. These trends pushed President Obama to publicly endorse marriage equality in 2012. And, for the first time ever, a majority of voters approved same-sex marriage ballot measures. They did it in Maine, Washington and Maryland, and in Minnesota, voters defeated a conservative-sponsored ballot measure to ban same-sex marriage. A federal appellate court ruled that California's Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, and two federal courts ruled against the Defense of Marriage Act. Wisconsin voters elected the nation's first out-of-the-closet lesbian to the US Senate, Tammy Baldwin. Voters also elected a record six openly gay and lesbian candidates to the House: incumbents Jared Polis (D-Colorado) and David Cicilline (D-Rhode Island) and newcomers Sean Patrick Maloney (D-New York), Mark Pocan (D-Wisconsin), Mark Takano (D-California), and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Arizona).

3. Living Wages. Voters in Albuquerque, Long Beach and San Jose passed ballot measures that will raise the [minimum wage](#) for workers in those cities. Albuquerque's citywide minimum wage will rise from \$7.50 to \$8.50 per hour in January 2013 and will automatically adjust in future years with inflation. The Long Beach ballot measure raises the minimum wage for hotel workers in that tourist city to \$13 per hour and guarantees hotel workers five paid sick days per year. In San Jose, the minimum wage will increase from \$8 per hour - the current minimum wage in California - to \$10 per hour and will adjust automatically in future years to keep pace with the rising cost of living. The San Jose campaign was triggered by students at San Jose State University as part of a class research project. Nationwide, public opinion polls show that Americans believe that the federal minimum wage should be adjusted so that full-time workers don't earn poverty-level pay. That would mean a minimum wage over \$10 an hour – comparable to what it was (in terms of purchasing power) in 1968.

4. ObamaCare Survives. Despite relentless partisan attacks in Congress and the courts since it was passed in 2010, the Affordable Care Act has taken its rightful place alongside Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security as one of the pillars of the nation's social safety net. The US Supreme Court upheld the law as constitutional, and four months later Obama was re-elected, ensuring that the law would be implemented on schedule during his second term. Now the administration must continue to educate the public about the many provisions of the law, a challenge highlighted by polls showing that many Americans know little about what they gained. The ACA stops insurance companies from denying coverage to people because they have health conditions, allows children to remain on a parent's insurance plan until age 26 and requires insurers to cover the costs of contraception without a copayment. While some progressive advocates argue that the nation should have adopted a single-payer health care system rather than ObamaCare, other progressives and most people in the health care community see it as a bold step in the right direction. As Americans get used to the law and fully recognize and utilize its life-saving benefits, the likelihood will grow that the nation will move toward a more efficient, less costly single-payer system. Meanwhile, both Medicare and Medicaid - which together cover more than 100 million Americans - have survived sustained attacks by the Republicans to eliminate the programs as we know them and dismantle America's system of social insurance and health security.

5. Progressives Protect Choice. Conservatives' attempts to limit women's reproductive freedom met with stiff opposition. Efforts to enact so called "personhood" laws (which define personhood from the moment of fertilization and ban all abortions) failed in all 11 states in which these laws were proposed. If enacted, these laws could even have banned in-vitro fertilization and some birth control methods. Led by Planned Parenthood, coalitions of health professionals, faith groups and women's organizations challenged these conservative efforts to pass the personhood laws through state legislatures and through ballot measures in Arkansas, Colorado, California, Florida, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Virginia. These progressive victories come on the heels of similar success in Mississippi in 2011. In Florida, voters defeated, by 55 percent to 45 percent, the

conservative-initiated Amendment 6, which would have denied insurance coverage for abortion services and removed from the state constitution a woman's right to reproductive "privacy," thus weakening the state court's ability to block potential abortion restrictions such as mandatory ultrasound laws or gestational bans on abortion. In 2012, the Senate unanimously passed an amendment to the defense authorization bill, sponsored by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), that would allow the military's health insurance plan to cover the cost of abortion for servicewomen and military dependents who are survivors of rape and incest.

6. Occupy Our Homes. With 12 million homeowners still "under water" and several million families a year still losing their homes to foreclosure, community organizers around the country mobilized a significant campaign to hold Wall Street banks accountable for the damage they created through predatory lending, financial speculation and fraud. In dozens of cities, homeowners "occupied" their homes with the support of neighbors and allies and stymied banks and local sheriffs who wanted to evict them for foreclosure. Pressured by local groups, many of them affiliated with the Home Defenders League and Occupy Our Homes networks, a number of cities, including Seattle, Oakland and Los Angeles, adopted "responsible banking" laws meant to hold banks accountable to meet community needs and laws to force banks to pay for the cost of maintaining foreclosed vacant properties that blight neighborhoods. A grassroots campaign by the ReFund California coalition persuaded the California legislature to pass, and Gov. Jerry Brown to sign, a "Homeowners Bill of Rights," which prohibits a number of unfair bank practices that have needlessly forced thousands of Californians into foreclosure. For example, it restricts dual-track foreclosures, where a lender forecloses on a borrower despite being in discussions over a loan modification to save the home, imposes civil penalties on fraudulently signed mortgage documents and allows homeowners to sue banks for fraudulent mortgage practices. Pressured by activists, and led by progressive attorneys general Eric Schneiderman of New York and Kamala Harris of California, [five major banks](#) agreed to a \$26 billion multistate settlement over foreclosure abuses. In January, President Obama appointed Richard Cordray as director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the centerpiece of the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial reform bill, to regulate the abusive business practices of credit card companies, mortgage lenders and payday lenders. In November, Massachusetts voters elected Elizabeth Warren, the agency's original architect, despite her being targeted by the bank lobby as their top priority for defeat. A few weeks later, she was named to the Senate banking committee, which oversees the financial industry. In his State of the Union address, Obama announced the creation of a federal-state task force to investigate and prosecute misconduct by lenders that triggered the financial crisis by selling risky residential mortgage-backed securities. Schneiderman, a task force cochair, has already sued J.P. Morgan Chase and Credit Suisse for deceiving investors and is likely to bring other banks to court, which could lead to tens of billions dollars more in bank fines that could help homeowners. Growing grassroots pressure also led the Obama administration to agree to fire acting Federal Housing Finance Agency Director Ed DeMarco, who opposed the White House's support for a plan to allow Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to reduce mortgage principal for "underwater" homeowners, which would bring their mortgages in line with current home values and reduce their monthly mortgage payments, giving them more money to spend on other economic activities. Financial reform activists want the administration to *require* banks to renegotiate "underwater" mortgages, but getting rid of DeMarco is an important step in that direction.

7. Beating the GOP's Voter Suppression Campaign. Thanks to an aggressive effort to educate voters, stir up controversy and take the issue to court, progressive activists beat back the Republican Party's efforts to reduce the turnout of young voters, African Americans and Latinos in November's elections. According to a comprehensive [report](#) by the think tank Demos, the result was a backlash against the GOP's heavy-handed tactics to intimidate voters and suppress the turnout of Democratic-leaning constituencies that included making robocalls that misleadingly told targeted voters that the Election Day had been changed, enacting voter identification laws and, in Ohio, limiting early voting hours. But activists fought back successfully, motivating voters angered by the GOP's skullduggery. Voting rights groups blocked 10 voter suppression laws in court. Using the GOP's strategy against them, progressives and Democrats motivated people to vote. As a result, turnout among young, black and Hispanic

voters actually increased as a share of the electorate compared with 2008, and, in many states, turnout rates jumped as well.

8. Expanding Same-Day Voter Registration. Add California to the list of states that allow voters to register and vote on election day - a victory for democracy. In September, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill allowing Californians to register to vote up to and including Election Day. (The current deadline is 15 days before an election). Common Cause, which sponsored the measure and shepherded it through the state legislature, says it could [boost voter rolls](#) by an estimated 8 percent. Republicans opposed the bill, warning about the potential of widespread voter fraud, even though there's no evidence of fraud in the eight other states - Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming - that already have election day registration laws. States with such laws generally have higher levels of voter turnout, especially among low-income and young voters.

9. We're Getting Greener All the Time. In Los Angeles, a coalition of unions, environmentalists and public health activists (including the Teamsters, the National Resources Defense Council and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy) persuaded the mayor and city council to adopt their "Don't Waste LA" plan, an historic reform of the city's commercial waste system that will require waste companies to get a city permit to haul trash from businesses and apartment buildings, improve working conditions for garbage haulers, dramatically expand recycling and create thousands of green jobs. The victory builds on the same blue-green coalition that over the past several years waged a successful campaign to clean up pollution at the dirty Los Angeles port and improve working conditions for the port's truck drivers. Nationwide protests, including civil disobedience at the White House, pressured the Obama administration to delay - and perhaps to stop - construction of the 1700 Keystone [XL pipeline](#) connecting oil sand mines in Alberta, Canada, to refineries in the Texas Gulf Coast. Despite the administration's waffle on the pipeline project, it adopted two significant new environmental regulations - tightening [air quality standards](#) for fine particulate matter and doubling vehicle fuel [efficiency standards](#) to 54.5 miles-per-gallon by 2025 (which will save Americans \$1.7 trillion at the gas pump) and dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In June, a federal appellate court ruled that the EPA has the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act, a move that corporate America had opposed.

10. Walmart Workers on the March. The first-ever strike by Walmart workers that began in October in a few California stores spread to over 100 cities around the country by the day after Thanksgiving, the nation's biggest shopping day. Tens of thousands of consumers, community activists and union members demonstrated their support in rallies and some acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, drawing widespread media attention. The United Food and Commercial Workers helped catalyze the protest, sponsored by Our Walmart, a network of the big box store's employees. Around the country and around the world, Walmart, the world's largest private employer, is increasingly on the defensive as its corporate practices come to light - not only paying poverty-level wages but also putting profits above worker safety by contracting with dangerous sweatshops in Bangladesh (where 112 workers died in a factory fire) and elsewhere to make its [clothes and toys](#), bribing Mexican officials to expand its [retail empire](#) and selling more [guns and ammunition](#) than any other retailer in the United States.

11. Fast-Food and Domestic Workers Gain Momentum. The past year, 2012, is likely to be seen as the year that the labor movement developed new strategies and made significant headway in organizing low-wage workers, not only those who toil for the behemoth Walmart, but also domestic workers and workers in the fast-food industry. In October, workers at McDonalds, Burger King and other fast-food chains in New York City staged a walkout to demand better pay and the right to unionize. Viewing these food-chain workers as a large and growing sector of exploited workers, the Service Employees International Union and New York Communities for Change joined forces to help coordinate the walkouts. Like farmworkers, most of America's 1.8 million domestic workers - nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers - are [not covered by federal wage](#), overtime, union-organizing, and other labor laws. Many toil 12 to 15 hours a day and get paid less than \$200 per week. The [first-ever study](#) of this invisible

workforce, released in November by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), a national network of groups in 17 cities and 11 states, found that 23 percent of domestic workers made less than their state's minimum wage (which must be at least \$7.25 an hour). Among live-in workers, 67 percent earned below the minimum wage, 65 percent had no health insurance, about 82 percent had no paid sick days and 25 percent said their jobs made it impossible to get five hours of uninterrupted sleep. Thanks to the NDWA, New York State passed the first Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2010. Last year the California legislature adopted a similar measure, but Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it in October. The activists plan to regroup and push for the bill this year in California and several other states.

12. Unions beat Proposition 32 in California. In California, labor unions helped bring out more than 40,000 volunteers and defeated the deceptive anti-union corporate power grab, Proposition 32, by a landslide 57 percent to 43 percent. Conservative forces had tried and failed three times before to persuade California voters to support a "paycheck protection" measure that would keep unions from using their members' dues money to support candidates and ballot questions. This time, the measure's backers - including wealthy GOP activist Charles Munger and a shadowy group linked to Karl Rove and the Koch Brothers - dressed it up as campaign finance reform, but California voters weren't buying it, thanks to a massive voter turnout effort by labor unions and their allies.

13. Progressive Tax Reform Makes Progress. The same coalition that waged the successful campaign to defeat Proposition 32 also mounted a grassroots effort on behalf of Proposition 30, the progressive income and sales tax measure to fund California's schools. The outcome - a 54 percent to 46 percent victory - bucked a long trend of voters rejecting higher taxes to pay for public services. Nationwide, support is growing for the so-called "Robin Hood" tax - formally called the Financial [Transaction Tax](#) - a small fee on large Wall Street transactions of currencies, bonds and shares, designed to discourage risky trades on Wall Street and to hold big banks accountable for the hardship they caused and the outrageous pay and bonuses they gave to top executives in the wake of the worst financial crisis since the Depression. The National Nurses Union is one of more than 65 organizations leading this campaign that would raise billions of dollars for health care, housing, jobs and education.

14. Dreamers Win Immigration Reform. By keeping up pressure on the White House, including meetings and direct action, United We Dream - a movement of immigrant youth, with support from immigrant rights and faith groups - pushed President Obama in June to announce his support for a [policy to offer](#) DREAM Act eligible immigrant youth protection from deportation and temporary legal status. Under the program, young undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children can receive two-year deportation deferrals and work permits. After Obama made that commitment, Dream Act activists hit the streets to register and mobilize Latino and Asian voters. Already, more than 300,000 young immigrants have applied and over 53,000 have received deferrals.

15. Student Activists Gain Ground. Don't believe the cynics and naysayers who fret about student apathy. In addition to the Dreamers movement for immigration reform, America's campuses are bursting with activism on a variety of issues. United Students Against [Sweatshops](#) coordinates campaigns on hundreds of campuses, including pushing colleges to do business with responsible, pro-union clothing producers such as the Alta Gracia [factory](#) in the Dominican Republic, supporting efforts by campus workers to improve pay and win union recognition and pressuring universities to sever contracts with companies that mistreat workers. In late 2012, student-led campaigns to get colleges and universities to divest from the [fossil fuel industry](#) spread to almost 200 campuses. Hampshire College and Unity College have already purged their endowments from fossil fuels. At Harvard, 72 percent of students endorsed a resolution supporting divestment. Students at many other colleges have persuaded their administrations to explore divestment.

16. Not-So-Smart ALEC. For many years, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a right-wing network of corporations and state legislators, has operated under the radar, drafting "model" laws that promote gun

ownership (including "stand your ground" laws), weaken unions, limit voting rights, encourage the privatization of education (such as school vouchers and charter schools) and weaken regulations that protect consumers, workers and the environment from corporate abuse. Last year the Center for Media and Democracy, along with Color of Change, waged a remarkable campaign to bring ALEC out of the shadows, identifying the corporations and billionaires that fund it. Progressive media outlets like The Nation publicized the expose', then the mainstream media jumped on the story. Embarrassed by the publicity, many of ALEC's corporate funders - 42 so far, including Walmart, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Coca Cola, Pepsi, McDonald's, Amazon, Proctor & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, MillerCoors, Dell, General Motors and General Electric - [have withdrawn](#) from the organization.

17. Voters Elect a More Diverse and Progressive Senate and House. Americans not only re-elected America's first African-American president, they also re-elected several of the most progressive Senators (including Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Sherrod Brown of Ohio) and put four new progressives - Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, Chris Murphy of Connecticut and Mazie Hirono of Hawaii (the first female Asian American Senator) - in the upper chamber. Two female Democrats - Hirono and Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota - replaced males who decided to retire. All Democratic incumbent female senators up for re-election this year won, including Claire McCaskill of Missouri, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, Dianne Feinstein of California and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. As a result, 20 women - a record - will now serve in the Senate. Another milestone: In New Hampshire, women now hold every key office including Senators Kelly Ayotte (a Republican) and Jeanne Shaheen (Democrat), newly-elected Gov. Maggie Hassan (a Democrat) and Democrats Carol Shea-Porter and Ann McLane Kuster, who wrested New Hampshire's two House seats from incumbent Republicans. These victories guaranteed there would be no Republican Senate with an opportunity to appoint justices to the Supreme Court who would have overturned Roe v Wade. Democrats running for the House bested their Republican rivals in the overall popular vote total. Combining the totals for all 435 House races, Democrats [won 1,362,351 more votes](#) than Republicans. Democratic House candidates earned 49.15 percent of the popular vote, while Republicans earned [only 48.03 percent](#). So how did Republicans win a majority of the seats? Because of gerrymandering by Republican-controlled states. Although Republicans outnumber Democrats 234 to 201 in the House, there are more progressive Democrats. For the first time, a majority of House Democrats will be women, people of color or both. The ranks of the House progressives will expand, welcoming newcomers (or returning members following a hiatus) Alan Grayson (Fla.), Jared Huffman (Calif.), Dan Kildee (Minn.), Kuster (NH), Grace Meng (NY), Patrick Murphy (Fla.), Rick Nolan (Minn.), Mark Pocan (Wis.), Raul Ruiz (Calif.), Carol Shea-Porter (NH), Mark Takano (Calif.), Hakeem Jeffries (NY), and Kyrsten Sinema (Ariz.). Meanwhile, several of the most lunatic right-wing Tea Party Republicans - including Allen West (Fla.), Chip Cravaack (Minn.), Bobby Schilling (Ill.), Roscoe Bartlett (Md.), Ann-Marie Buerkle (NY), Francisco Canseco (Tex.), and Joe Walsh (Ill.) - lost their House seats. Even Michelle Bachmann, founder of the House Tea Party caucus, had to fight hard to keep her seat representing Twin Cities suburbs. She edged out her Democratic opponent, businessman Jim Graves, by just 4,207 votes, or a little over 1 percent of the 357,035 votes cast in Minnesota's 6th Congressional District. Bachmann outspent Graves \$22.4 million to \$2.2 million, an 11-to-1 margin, making it the most expensive House race. [In other words](#), Bachmann spent \$124 for each vote she received compared to Graves' \$13 per vote.

18. Local Progress. Progressive candidates won victories in hundreds of local and state races around the country. Among them was Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin, whom voters re-elected in November for a second two-year term with 58 percent of the vote. A month later, Shumlin, a progressive Democrat who supports single-payer health insurance, was elected chair of the Democratic Governors Association. In Worcester, Mass., Mary Keefe, a veteran community organizer with the Pleasant Street Neighborhood Network Center and a leader of Worcester Interfaith, was elected to the state legislature, with the support of unions and community groups, on a platform of supporting progressive tax increases to stop draconian budget cuts and fund human services. In conservative San Diego, voters elected progressive Bob Filner - a former Freedom Rider (he spent two months in a Mississippi jail for defying segregation laws), college professor, school board, city council member and 10-term Congressman (and a founding

member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus) - to be the city's first Democratic mayor since 1992 and only its second since 1971. In Tallahassee, Fla., voters elected 33-year old Andrew Gillum to his third four-year term on the city commission with over 70 percent of the vote. Despite his youth, Gillum is a veteran civil rights and voting rights activist. As a college student, he helped organized a huge march on Tallahassee to protest Gov. Jeb Bush's executive order to abolish affirmative action in state university admissions and state contracting. In addition to his position on the city commission, he serves as national director of the Young Elected Officials Network, a project of People for the American Way. In mid-November, left-leaning elected officials from 32 municipalities (including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Hartford, Milwaukee, Mobile, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle) met in Washington, DC, to form Local Progress, a network of progressive municipal officials designed to share policy and strategy ideas. They elected Seattle City Council member Nick Licata - who sponsored the city's paid sick-leave law, among other progressive accomplishments - as chair.

19. Mobilizing the Union Vote. Although union members represent only 11 percent of all American workers, they comprised [18 percent of voters](#) in the November election - higher in key swing states where unions targeted their resources. Union members were not only more likely than non-union workers to vote, they also were more likely to knock on doors, make phone calls and participate in other grassroots campaign activities. More than any other constituency, union members comprise the ground troops for progressive candidates and causes. An analysis of exit polls by Guy Molyneaux of Hart Research Associates also reveals that unions played an important role in offsetting key demographic and social factors that often push voters to support Republicans. For example, 65 percent of union members, compared with 47 percent of nonunion voters, supported Obama. Among union men, 61 percent voted for Obama, compared with only 40 percent of nonunion men. A whopping 72 percent of union women (compared with 53 percent of nonunion women) voted for Obama. Union membership often trumped racial prejudice. Fifty-five percent of white male union members went for Obama compared with only 31 percent of white males who don't belong to unions. Similarly, 65 percent of white women in unions preferred Obama, compared with only 39 percent of nonunion white women. Obama didn't expect to get many votes among white evangelicals, but union membership made a significant difference in how these religious Christians voted. Obama won the votes of 35 percent white evangelicals who were also union members, but only 16 percent of white evangelicals who had no union affiliation. Even among Latinos, union membership was significant in influencing their vote; 80 percent of unionized Latinos voted for Obama but only 70 percent of nonunion Latinos did so.

20. Hurricane Sandy Revealed Support for Big Government, Even by Republicans. Big disasters, such as the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center, earthquakes, hurricanes and plane crashes often remind Americans, even Republican politicians, why they need government - and government employees. Disasters like Hurricane Sandy often bring out the best in the American people, including the spirit of volunteerism and compassion. But they also bring out the hypocrisy of GOP politicians, who love to attack "big government," unless it's for corporate subsidies, military spending or disaster relief. Exhibit No. 1 is New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who has made his reputation as a budget-slashing, tax-cutting bully. In his keynote speech at the Republican convention in August, Christie touted his record of attacking New Jersey's public employees in New Jersey. Democrats, Christie said, think that Americans "need to be coddled by big government." Republicans, in contrast, are willing to make the "hard choices" to "cut federal spending and fundamentally reduce the size of government." But three months later, as soon as Hurricane Sandy swept through the Garden State, destroying cities and towns along its Atlantic coast, Christie was understandably first in line with a cup in his hand, begging President Obama for federal aid and hugging Obama for the cameras. Conservative Congressman Peter King (R-NY) raised such [holy hell](#) when Congress failed to authorize \$60 billion to aid Sandy's victims, primarily in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, that Speaker John Boehner agreed to schedule a vote by January 15.

21. Chicago Teachers Win Their Strike. Like their counterparts around the country, Chicago's teachers have

taken a beating over the past few years, as conservative billionaires and corporate foundations push their agenda of privatizing public education with vouchers, charter schools, over-reliance on standardized tests and business-style management that seeks to denigrate and punish teachers rather than collaborate with them. Finally, in September, 29,000 Chicago teachers went on strike to challenge the corporate vision. Although the seven-day strike certainly inconvenienced many parents, the Chicago Teachers Union won the battle for public opinion by framing its demands as concerns for smaller class sizes, more up-to-date textbooks and air conditioning in classrooms. They stood up to the bullying of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who consistently denigrated teachers and promote a corporate agenda of school privatization and business-style management, trying to weaken the teachers' voices in school matters. As CTU's feisty president Karen Lewis reminded Chicagoans, the strike wasn't just about higher wages but also about the distribution of resources. "This education crisis is real, especially if you are Black or Brown in Chicago," she explained. "They want to privatize public education and further disrupt our neighborhoods. There is an attack on public institutions, many of which serve low-income and working-class families. "The union [won modest](#) pay increases and some protection from district layoffs and firings, but also won a commitment to [hire 600 new teachers](#) in art, music and other 'enrichment' courses and got the school district to promise to hire more counselors, supply textbooks by the first day of school and include a parent representative on a class-size review committee. The union's efforts helped build a coalition of parents, teachers and community activists that will continue to battle for better schools.

22. Challenging Citizens United. The Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling in 2010 - equating money with free speech - unleashed a flood of money from billionaires and corporations, much of it through hard-to-trace "super-PACs" and so-called "social welfare" organizations. In the wake of that ruling, Montana Attorney General Steve Bullock defended his state's Corrupt Practices Act, which banned corporate campaign funds, all the way to the Supreme Court. The court overturned the Montana law 5 to 4, undermining the ability of states and cities to restrict corporations from trying to buy elections. Although Bullock lost that fight, Montanans admired his populist ideals and elected him governor in November. That same day, Montana voters also supported Initiative I-166, which endorsed a constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United, by a 74.8 percent margin. In Colorado, voters endorsed a similar ballot initiative, Proposition 65, with 73.8 percent of the vote. Voters in more than 120 cities and towns in Oregon, Colorado, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, Massachusetts and California passed [similar measures](#). Public opinion polls show that Americans overwhelmingly oppose Citizens United and believe that corporations, and corporate money, have too much influence in politics.

23. Beating the Billionaires. The US Chamber of Commerce, other big business lobby groups, and a strange assortment of right-wing billionaires (including the Koch brothers and Sheldon Adelson), poured or directed outrageous sums of money to help Romney and other conservative Republican candidates, but more often than not wound up losing. According to the Sunlight Foundation, outside groups [spent more](#) than \$1.3 billion on independent expenditures to influence the outcome of the November elections, but had a terrible "return" on their investment. Much of the business and billionaire war chest was filtered through Karl Rove's American Crossroads, which spent \$104 million in election campaigns and had a 1.29 percent success rate. Its sister organization, Crossroads Grassroots Policy Strategies, also orchestrated by Rove, spent \$70.7 million and had a 14.4 percent success rate. The US Chamber of Commerce spent \$32.6 million for a success rate of 6.9 percent. The American Future Fund, run by the Koch brothers, spent \$23.9 million but backed a winner in only 5.6 percent of the races. The National Rifle Association's Political Victory Fund spent \$11.8 million and had a tiny success rate of 0.83 percent - and that was before the NRA embarrassed itself with its call to post armed guards at public schools after 20 children and six adults were killed by a military-style assault weapon at an elementary school in Connecticut in December.

24. Killing the Death Penalty. The United States may be gradually moving toward joining every other democratic society in abolishing the death penalty. In 2012, [Connecticut became the fifth](#) state in the past five years

to abolish the death penalty. Of the 33 states that still have the death penalty on their books, 13 haven't executed anyone for at least five years. Nine states executed death-row inmates last year, but three quarters of the 43 executions took place in just four states: Texas (15), and Arizona, Mississippi and Oklahoma (each with six). Thanks to the Innocence Project and other advocates, a growing number of Americans recognize that the death penalty doesn't deter crime. Death row is disproportionately comprised of poor and African Americans, an indication of the racial and class bias of our criminal justice system. The system is also arbitrary and prone to egregious mistakes. Since 1973, 142 death-row inmates have been freed after being exonerated with DNA evidence. As The New York Times recently editorialized in favor of ending the death penalty, the "justifications for a cruel and uncivilized punishment have been seriously undermined by a growing group of judges, prosecutors, scholars and others involved in criminal justice, conservatives and liberals alike."

25. Muzzling the NRA. In 2011 (the most recent year for these figures) there were [15,953 murders](#) in the United States and 11,101 (30 a day) were caused by firearms. Suicides and unintentional shootings account for another 20,000 deaths by guns each year. Many more people are injured - some seriously and permanently - by gun violence, disproportionately poor African Americans living in inner cities. At least seven mass killings occurred in 2012 - six died at an Oak Creek, Wis., Sikh temple when a white supremacist went on a rampage in August; four were killed in an Atlanta day spa in February; five were killed at a Seattle coffee shop in May; six died at a Minneapolis sign company in September; seven were gunned down at an Oakland religious college in April; and 12 were killed and 58 wounded in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater in July. But it may have required a mass shooting in a small suburban town in Connecticut - which killed 20 children and six adults - to make the epidemic of gun violence a national priority. The number of [American households](#) that own guns has actually declined in recent decades, from almost 50 percent in 1973 to just over 32 percent 2010. Less than five percent of gun owners are NRA members - probably concentrated among the [20 percent of gun owners](#) who possess about 65 percent of the nation's guns. And polls show that even before the Sandy Hook elementary school massacre, most gun owners - even most NRA members - wanted stronger gun controls, including background checks on gun buyers and restrictions on the sale of military-style assault weapons. After the Connecticut killings, public opinion was even more favorable toward tough gun laws. The tragedy galvanized a broad coalition of faith groups, unions, community organizations, medical professionals, law enforcement officials and big-city mayors. They quickly brought people together for prayer vigils and rallies. But soon they will have to put pressure on Congress and shine a spotlight on the gun manufacturers, their Wall Street investors and gun retailers like Walmart ([which sells 13 percent](#) of all Bushmaster assault rifles) that profit from the proliferation of deadly assault weapons. Senator Diane Feinstein pledged to file strong [legislation](#) in 2013 and hold hearings that could provide a dramatic forum for advocates of tougher gun laws - including the survivors of gun violence, the families of victims, and gun owners who believe in sensible reforms - to tell their stories. The growing outrage against senseless gun deaths may finally translate into a sustained movement that can do battle with the NRA.

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